The alive skeletons of Luca Signorelli

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Undoubtedly the masterpiece of Luca Signorelli is the fresco decoration of the San Brizio Chapel in the Orvieto Cathedral. In only three years from 1499 to 1502 Luca painted six of the eight triangular rib vaults of the gothic ceiling (the other two were depicted by Fra Beato Angelico and Benozzo Gozzoli half century before) and the side walls of the Chapel. The fresco cycle represents the Preaching of the Antichrist, the Apocalypse, the Resurrection of the Flesh, the Hell, the Last Judgment, the Damned and the Blessed Consigned to Paradise. The representations are the fruit of an incredible originality and inventiveness that have deeply shocked the visitors as well as the art critics. Bernard Berenson said that Signorelli is one of the greatest illustrators and his art is an extremely important part of our figurative heritage. Never before Italian artists had figurative ideas of such unforgettable power in the representations of similar biblical events. The fantastic imagination of the painter, the aerial perspectives and the use of vivid colours still maintain a modern attractiveness for whoever visits the Chapel. But another singular depiction makes a deep impression: on the wall where the Resurrection of the Flesh is represented, near vigorous naked figures of men and women a group of skeletons come in walking and gesticulating. They seem to express senses of surprise and happiness. They are laughing thanks to mandibles reach of teeth (Figure 1). A similar use of living skeletons is rare in the previous painters. Some years before, dancing living skeletons were used when the Macabre Dance was represented as a warning of the transience of life. There are several examples in Europe and also in Italy. But what a difference in the anatomical details! The skeletons which were depicted by Simone Baschenis on the external walls of San Vigilio Church in Pinzolo (near Trento) and those represented by Giacomo Borlone de Buschis on the fresco in the Oratory of the Disciplinarians (an order of flagellants monks) in Clusone (near Bergamo) are very approximate without the sternum, with excessive ribs and an inexact representation of the basin (Figure 2). Instead, Signorelli shows an extraordinary knowledge of the anatomy without errors and with precise details of the bones. During the XV...
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century several painters (active in Tuscany) were used to make dissections of the cadavers for studying the anatomy even if this practice was not authorized. The most famous was Leonardo. Vasari writes that Rosso, the clever Florentine painter, when was living in San Sepolcro exhumed cadavers and when he went in Fontainebleau worked to a book of anatomy that was not be able to print for his sudden death. The perfect anatomy of the osseous system that Rosso had achieved is showed in a drawing dated 1518 representing a macabre allegory in which two skeletons (one that seems really dead, the other that is reading a book and speaking to other characters) are represented with a quality and a precision never before visible. These painters were interested in the knowledge of the exact arrangement of the bones for a real representation of the figures and particularly of the nudes such as those that Signorelli painted in the wonderful Resurrection of the Flesh where near to the skeletons vigorous young female and male figures are depicted with a perfect muscular anatomy. Certainly, these painters were able to advance the anatomists not only in the study of the anatomic organs, but also in the ideation of a skeleton that seems alive. The modern human anatomy will be born some decades after when Andreas Vesalius will print De human corporis fabrica as the result of the dissections personally carried out during his teaching in Padua. It is singular that in these monumental books the splendid anatomical drawings of the skeleton (made by the Flemish artist Stephan Calcar, Titian’s pupil) simulate alive subjects as those painters had previously invented (Figure 3). At last, the sternum is rightly shown recognizing that it consists of three portions and the stones of basin are exactly represented. At the same time (1543), Vesalius assembled an entire human skeleton with the aid of the surgeon Franz Jeckelmann. The skeleton is the world’s oldest anatomical preparation of this type and is visible at the University of Basel.